

## BOOK REVIEW

Xin Fan,

*World History and National Identity in China:  
The Twentieth Century*

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Xin Fan's book examines the process through which world history emerged from general global knowledge to a professional discipline of scholarly studies. His research spans from the late Qing period to the Reform Era. Throughout the twentieth century, Chinese scholars' knowledge of world history was enriched by their interaction with outside scholarship and improvements in their professional training and research skills. However, tensions between intellectuals' autonomy and state control grew more intense during the process. It was also through the development of world history as a field of teaching and research that national identity took shape. Although "the combined forces of cultural, social, and political formations" nourished the development of nationalism, still a pervasive entity in today's China, resistance to it, especially among intellectuals, has persisted (p. ix). Fan's research fits in the scholarly literature about twentieth-century Chinese intellectuals.<sup>1</sup> His approach to examining long-term world history highlights the continuity and changes within Chinese intellectual frameworks and academic disciplines during the twentieth century. Fan focuses on a representative group of scholars who studied the ancient non-Chinese world, including late Qing gentry scholars, academic professionals who worked in succession under the Republican and Communist regimes, and specialized intellectuals who trained in the Mao era and became prominent figures in their fields in the post-Mao days. By closely examining the life experiences and publications of these world history scholars, Fan explains how state policy and cultural atmosphere shaped their understanding of the ancient world and their nationalist narratives.

Fan divides the scholarly development of world history into three stages: "the rise of the amateur world-historical writing" by late Qing gentry

scholars; "the inclusion of world history as a mandatory teaching component in school curricula" by virtue of the joint efforts of Euro-American-trained professionals and the Nationalist Party in the Republic; and the "establishment of world history as a research field" by specialized experts and state control in the People's Republic from 1949 to the 1980s (p. x). The structure of the book follows these three chronological stages, though Fan does not allocate his analysis evenly. Chapter 1 and chapter 2 focus on the late Qing and the Republican era, respectively, and the subsequent three chapters examine in greater detail the scholarly development of world history in the People's Republic. Despite world historians' divergent interests in different eras having, they all attempted to break cross-cultural boundaries as they formulated shifting understandings of world history during the twentieth century. They never ceased questioning Eurocentrism and provoked intellectual debates on key concepts in the field of world history such as "classical antiquity" and the "Asiatic mode of production." Because of these generations of scholars' continued efforts, world historian reached a consensus to incorporate China as an organic part of the world.

Chapter 1 examines the emergence of world-historical writings as gentry scholars who attempted to address their concerns about global space amid print capitalism in late Qing period. Although increasing translations of world history-related works were introduced to China by missionaries and Chinese elites after the opium war, common people's the demand for such knowledge continued to grow (p.23). More importantly, disillusioned with China's decline in the global order since the mid-nineteenth century, these community-based gentry scholars,

notably Zhou Weihan, sought to place/replace the country within the world through their knowledge of world history. Although Zhou lacked linguistic skills and professional training to read and analyze primary texts in foreign languages, he completed his breakthrough volume, *An Outline of Western History*, with support from his strong Chaozhou-based social network of translators, writers, and publishers. In the book, “probably the first Chinese language work on ancient world history written by a Chinese scholar,” Zhou highlights the similarities between people in China and “the West.” Like Zhou, many early world history writers in the late Qing developed a worldview that “allowed them to overcome cultural differences” (p. 37).

Unlike their counterparts in the late Qing, who relied heavily on regional social support, Republican scholars had opportunities to study abroad and received professional historical training. These new professional historians enjoyed intellectual autonomy under the rule of the Republican government and developed world history into a specific teaching field. Their shared experiences in education and pursuit of academic independence, however, did not lead to a homogeneous interpretation of world history in their writings. In fact, they held contrasting, if not opposing, standpoints on the topic of nationalism. Chen Hengzhe, a famous female scholar whose work was liberal-influenced, identified imperialism and internationalism as “a pair of contradicting cultural forces that would determine the future of the world” (p. 61). For Chen, nationalism was an anti-democratic force, for it could intensify competition among colonizers. He Bingsong, another renowned world historian in the 1920s, but who leaned conservative, favored nationalism for its potential to overcome imperialism as a positive means for national sovereignty and world harmony. The Guomindang (GMD) state welcomed such pro-nationalism narratives as it was purportedly upholding the nationalist movement. Lei Haizong, a new leading figure in the field of world history when Chen and He moved to other academic subjects, criticized the “Eurocentric bias embedded in the periodization of world history” and stressed the distinctness of Chinese culture, arguing that Chinese militarism should be revived to save the nation (p. 69). In the 1930s more historians, including Lei,

embraced the notion of incorporating politics into academic and social responsibilities in light of the crisis of the full-scale war with Japan even if it might damage their academic autonomy. The prominent “Zhanguo Ce clique,” which was comprised of scholars who shared such thoughts, adopted a China-centered approach to interpreting the past.

Some of these scholars were forced by the new government to study and teach world history after the 1949 founding of the PRC. Their struggles with Marxism and conflicts with “new” world historians who studied in new socialist universities are the focus of Chapter 3. In sharp contrast to its Republican predecessors, who granted more freedoms to universities in terms of personnel, course arrangement, and teaching approaches, the new Communist government sought to reform China’s higher education from its inception by adopting a new *jiaoyanshi* system (a Soviet model). The *jiaoyanshi* system “placed individual teachers within a workspace where they had to both mutually supervise and collectively criticize each other” (p. 3). Under the policy of “leaning to one side,” Chinese world historians became more involved with Soviet academics by translating and debating Soviet works in the early 1950s. As the Party’s control tightened, the tension between intellectuals and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) deepened. Lin Zhichun and Tong Shuyue represented the group of newly admitted red experts who collaborated with the state, but still sought to maintain autonomy in teaching and research. Lei Haizong and Wu Mi represented the old-school group, who worked in institutions before the PRC and whom the CCP distrusted, suppressed, and forced to transform their previous knowledge within the frame of Marxism and Marxist historiography.

Chapter 4 continues the discussion of how the same historians in chapter 3 manipulated their expertise to interpret and challenge some principles of state-sanctioned Marxism. This chapter investigates debates between Lin Zhichun and Tong Shuyue on the Marxist concept of the Asiatic mode of production (AMP) in the 1950s, a debate which scholarship has hitherto largely ignored and which Fan argues was a “significant movement” in world history (p. 149). Since Marx did not provide a clear definition of the AMP, Tong argued that the AMP

referred to primitive Communism, a spatial regime, whereas Lin considered it a temporal conception and a lower stage of slavery. World history scholars thus found subtle ways to circumvent the influence of state control without challenging highly ideological pressures from the Party-state directly. They drew upon the notion of Chinese exceptionalism to “exclude the external influences from the communist state on historical writing.” (p. 131.)

Like most academic disciplines, the study of world history revived after Mao’s death in 1976. Not only did professional research organizations and publication platforms for world history increase, but the scholarly discipline also witnessed the rise of nationalist narratives in accordance with scholars’ growing obsession with modernity. As Fan explains in chapter 5, world historians welcomed the liberal and nationalist atmosphere in academia, and reinterpreted Marxism and revised some of their opinions in the Mao era. World-historical studies became a tool for the project of nation-building. In the final two decades of the twentieth century, China’s world history scholarship continued to eschew Marxist historiography as professionalization within the discipline increased.

This reviewer would have appreciated the author exploring in more depth the role that the Qing court and the Republican government played in shaping world history studies in China. Fan mentions that the conservative group in the Qing court criticized Guo Songtao for his praise of Europe in his diaries, reflecting “the role of neo-Confucianism” in shaping world-historical consciousness among late Qing scholar-officials (p. 17). Fan, however, pays little attention to how the Qing court responded to such world-historical writings. Except for brief descriptions of the standardization of history curricula that the Republican government imposed in the first two decades of the twentieth century (pp. 56-58), and the Ministry of Propaganda’s early 1940s cultural campaign to promote China-centered culture, the Republican government was absent, in Fan’s account, from the development of world history as a professional research and teaching field. Because Fan does not examine the Qing court and Republican government extensively, intellectual resistance to state control in the late Qing and

Republican eras is less apparent than it was during the People’s Republic era.

Fan grounds his firmly in primary sources, notably the thorough use of works published by his protagonists, and engages with current scholarship. His concise citations and summaries of scholarly articles and books allow readers to appreciate these prominent figures’ writings. But above all, *World History and National Identity in China* makes two major historiographical contributions. First is that it examines alternatives to national narratives of history that scholars have considered are the central theme of Chinese intellectual production and modern Chinese historiography. The formation of twentieth-century Chinese identity has been constantly understood by scholars through intellectuals’ vision of the Chinese state and nation.<sup>2</sup> To answer Duara’s calls for researchers to rescue history from the linear and inevitable nation-state interpretation,<sup>3</sup> Fan shows that Chinese world history scholars not only provided cogent critiques of such narrative, but also presented alternative discourses in their explanation of the world. Second, *World History and National Identity in China* expands the temporal scale of the study of Chinese world history beyond the People’s Republic, which Q. Edward Wang and Luo Xu have already examined thoroughly in their work.<sup>4</sup> Fan traces the origin of world history to the late Qing era and presents readers with the long process through which Chinese world historians established their scholarly discipline. This long-term approach allows us to understand continuities and discontinuities in the history of this intellectual field, and the transformation of the worldviews of specific individuals like Lin Zhichun and Lei Haizong.

As innovative and persuasive as it is, there are some questions that I hope the author could answer in his future work. How did foreign-trained professionals confront scholars who trained in the domestic Confucian framework (specifically on the issue of West vs. East) in the early Republican period? How did the disparity of education resources between the northeast provinces and other areas in 1950s China affect the scholarly development of world history? The conflict between Wang Xingyun and Wu Mi ended in Wu’s victory, although the latter was criticized by the former for deviating from Marxist doctrine in his teachings (pp.1-8). Why did “new”

world historians like Wang Xingyun not seek support from high-level administrators such as Education Bureau officials? If such conflicts were resolved by those within the college, then does that mean that universities in the early People's Republic still enjoyed a relatively large degree of autonomy? Fan also notices the gender imbalance in the field of China's world history. If one considers the rising numbers of women intellectuals since the early republican period, then why did fewer women join this field? What impact did this gender imbalance have on the making of world history as an academic discipline?

To conclude, Fan's work offers a complete and convincing account of the trajectory of world history

in twentieth-century China. By tracing the origins of world history learnings in the late Qing dynasty and discussing its long-term development throughout the Republican and Mao eras to Reform and Opening Up, Fan furthers our understanding of Chinese intellectual history and the transformations of world history as a scholarly field over China's long twentieth century.

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<sup>1</sup> The current scholarship has examined Chinese scholars from different eras and different fields. A few publications from after 2000 include the following: Rebecca Karl, *Staging the World: Chinese Nationalism at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002); Philip Kuhn, *The Origins of the Modern Chinese State* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004); Joel Andreas, *Rise of the Red Engineers: The Cultural Revolution and the Origins of China's New Class* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009); Peter Zarrow, *After Empire: The Conceptual Transformation of the Chinese State, 1885-1924* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012); and Sebastian Veg, *Minjian: The Rise of China's Grassroots Intellectuals* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019).

<sup>2</sup> Except for Andreas's *Rise of the Red Engineers* and Veg's *Minjian*, other books that I have listed in footnote 1 fit into this category.

<sup>3</sup> Prasenjit Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

<sup>4</sup> Q. Edward Wang, "Encountering the World: China and Its Other(s) in Historical Narratives, 1949-1989," *Journal of World History* 14, no. 3 (2003):327-358; Luo Xu, "Reconstructing World History in the People's Republic of China since the 1980s," *Journal of World History* 18, no. 3 (2007): 325-350.



## Response

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As an avid reader of *The PRC History Review* myself, it is a great honor to know that my own book, *World History and National identity in China*, is now under review here. For this, I am eternally grateful for Yidi Wu's effort to commission the work. Undoubtedly, what she does is a great service to the field. I also thank Rong Kong for this extraordinarily thorough and generous review. Not only does it offer a useful summary of key arguments from each chapter, but it also helps the reader to place the history of world-historical studies in China within the wider context of twentieth century social and political changes. In addition, it recognizes the two intellectual interventions that I strive to make in *World History and National identity in China*: to examine alternative narratives to national history in China and to trace the origins of world-historical studies in China to the periods prior to the People's Republic.

As the author, reading Kong's review is satisfying and stimulating, for it is not just a simple summary of my book. Nor is it a laundry list of questions and critiques. Instead, Kong's review is a piece of thoughtful work on its own. Her comments and questions not only remind me of some issues that are yet unsolved in this volume, but they also encourage me to further pursue answers to them in my future endeavors. For these reasons, I appreciate the opportunity to continue this dialogue. Please consider my response to Kong's review not as definite answers to her questions, but instead as part of the process of re-examining some significant issues, some of which are even beyond the scope of this book project.

The subject of this study is world history in China. It is a confusing concept, for it registers a field of scholarly teaching and research, and a body of knowledge about the hitherto global space and historical time. If one wants to explore world history in China, the scope can be massive, as the boundaries to define the subject matter are shifting constantly.

As Kong points out correctly, my approach is to focus on "a representative group of scholars who studied the ancient non-Chinese world over the twentieth century." To be precise, they are the scholars in a sub-field in world history — "ancient world history" (*shijie gudaishi*). I chose this sub-field because its development has occurred in the dynamic interplay between politics of time and space in the shaping of modern Chinese identities. As ancient world history remains representative yet selective, I am reluctant to claim that the protagonists of this book are the ones who actually shaped modern Chinese identities. Rather, what they struggled with, I contend, reflects the tensions (ancient vs. modern, Chinese vs. foreign) that accompany the formation of Chinese national identity.

The state played a significant role in this process of identity formation. As Kong observes sharply, it is an embedded theme in my book. Yet what does really constitute the state? This question begs our attention. In the past, scholars assumed a binary and often antagonistic relationship between state and society. Scholars in the recent years have challenged this simplistic assumption. My research recognizes the complicated relationship between state intervention and intellectual autonomy. On the one hand, Kong and I might agree, in light of post-colonial theoretical approaches such as the one elaborated by Homi Bhabha in his *The Location of Culture* that the state could never fully monopolize knowledge production; on the other hand, we might have divergent views on the changing role of the state in China's long twentieth century. In several places, Kong reminds me to pay more attention to the late Qing court's and the Republican state's efforts to promote world history. I agree that the rise of world-historical studies in China invites us to rethink the relationship between history education and state agendas. Yet, at least the archival materials that I have gathered so far cannot afford a view in which a strong, active, and interventionist state injected an ideological agenda

into world-historical teaching and research in the late Qing and early Republican periods. Neither did I find strong evidence that indicated that the Nationalist government intended to grant “more freedom to universities.” For me, these regimes had yet developed apparatuses (in contrast to the *jiaoyangshi* system) to inflict clear agendas onto intellectual communities of the time. At the same time, if we further expand the scope of this book into the history of international relations and information gathering, such as what Matthew Mosca and Jenny Huangfu Day have done, then we may be able to tell a different story.

I am also grateful for the questions that Kong raises in this review. They are fascinating, and they press me to rethink several significant issues in the book. I will certainly need more time to work on them in the future, but let me offer some tentative ideas and premature thoughts here.

The first question that Kong raises points us to an important question in the field of Chinese intellectual thought. The relationship between “Confucian ideals” and “Western knowledge” was once the most heatedly-debated issues in the field. From Joseph Levenson and Guy Alitto to Charlotte Furth, among others, scholars have been writing about these debates and dialogues over the past few decades. As the field evolves quickly at the opening of the second decade of the twentieth-first century, how do we reconcile with this legacy? Amid changing paradigms of scholarly inquiries, what might the new generation offer? I am also keen to observe the changes in the field. However, the protagonists in this book did not leave too much for me to discuss these issues further. I was at a point where I contemplated whether or not to include Gu Jiegang in Chapter 2, but in the end, I had to drop the idea because the project was mainly about ancient world history instead of ancient Chinese history.

The second question is perhaps an invitation to the materialistic turn in the study of knowledge production? I have noticed the disparity of “education resources” between the northeast provinces and other places in the 1950s. Yet I might have to dwell upon the concept of “resources.” What should one include here? Local scholars or foreign experts that could teach world history? Or library

collections that could sustain active research agendas? How about social organizations and academic buildings that could host a growing number of university students and teachers? My book examines the national ancient world history seminar that occurred at Northeast Normal University from 1955 to 1957, but I would love to explore the material cultural approach further in my future research.

The third question relates to intellectual politics between old-generation and new-generation scholars in 1950s China, and it probes further into the question of intellectual autonomy. I did not intend to argue for a winner in the conflict between Wu Mi and Wang Xingyun. Both parties, one way or another, had to face the imposing pressure from the socialist state and struggled to adjust their own positions within the new system. Wu Mi suffered a great deal in the later political campaigns. But Kong raises an excellent question because it invites us to rethink who the administration was in 1950s China. A future inquiry into this question may help us to better appreciate the complicated relationship between state and society, which is important for the development of world history in China during this period.

Last but not least, I am truly grateful for Kong’s comment on gender imbalance in the field. I plan on working on it in my next book project. But returning to this volume, I struggled with the lack of primary sources. I chose to study ancient world history, which both liberated me from the debates over modernity and confined me to a small group of scholars whose professional identity remained as “world historian.” Chen Hengzhe was an outspoken voice at a certain point, but her withdrawal from the field is important and begs our attention. Upon reflection, I have taken notice of the question of unbecoming. What prevents one from doing history, Chinese history, or world history? Unable to provide an answer to this question in my book, I am in total agreement with Kong that the lack of gender balance has been a troubling issue in the field from its beginning until today. We might rehabilitate some women scholars’ contributions from the past, but it is an even more urgent task to ask why the field had hitherto turned away talented women scholars like Chen Hengzhe. It is a problem not just for scholars who are interested in world

history in China, but also a problem for the general fields of intellectual thought and historiography.